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**Retropolis**

# ‘You feel that the devil is helping you’: MS-13’s satanic history

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By Michael E. Miller

In September, an undercover informant led police into the woods of Maryland’s Wheaton Regional Park, along trails with pastoral names like Deer Hollow and Oak Ridge, to a patch of shovel-turned earth.

Inside the shallow grave, a shredded, bloodstained sweatshirt hinted at a horrific crime.

“The victim had been stabbed over one-hundred times, decapitated, dismembered, and his heart had been excised from his chest and thrown into the grave,” Montgomery County detectives wrote in court papers made public last month.

The grisly details drew widespread attention.

“Satanic murder,” declared a headline in the Sun.

Authorities haven’t said why the unidentified victim was mutilated, but the British tabloid could, perhaps, be forgiven for jumping to conclusions.

According to police, the killing was the work of La Mara Salvatrucha: a violent street gang known as MS-13 with a long history of satanism.

Some of the gang’s founders were devil-worshiping metal heads, according to experts. And although the connection has waned over the past 30 years, it can still be seen in MS-13’s use of satanic nicknames, tattoos and other imagery. The gang’s devil horns hand sign is known as “la garra,” a Spanish reference to Satan’s claws. And some MS-13 members have told investigators that they committed their crimes at the behest of “la bestia,” or the Beast.

“The beast … wanted a soul,” an MS-13 member nicknamed Diabolical said after killing a 15-year-old girl who’d disrespected his satanic shrine, prosecutors told a Houston courtroom earlier this year.

**The Mara Salvatrucha Stoners**

Mara Salvatrucha’s satanic influences are as old as the gang itself.

Long before it became known as MS-13, the gang was called the Mara Salvatrucha Stoners. As the name suggests, it was founded by marijuana-smoking heavy metal fans in Los Angeles in the 1970s, according to Thomas Ward, an anthropology professor at the University of Southern California who has studied the gang.

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Originally, the gang was little more than a club for teenage Salvadorans to get high and listen to music, Ward writes in his ethnography of the gang, “Gangsters Without Borders.” It bore little resemblance to other Latino gangs. Instead of baggy clothes, its members wore black leather jackets and tight, frayed jeans. But it was also different than other stoner groups in one important respect.

“A few of its members were hard-core Satanists who worshipped the devil and went so far as to practice gruesome animal sacrifices,” Ward writes. “These Satanists gave MSS its badass reputation for evil. Although the vast majority of these stoners never participated in these bloody ritual animal sacrifices or gave any thought to becoming Satanists, they banked on their gang’s reputation for devil worship, which gave it and them an aura of mystery and terror.”

One Mara Salvatrucha member told Ward of his initiation into the gang.

“We went to a cemetery and swore an oath by drinking each other’s blood,” he said. “We took a knife and cut our hands and then drained our blood into a cup to drink it. We smoked a lot of *mota* [marijuana], and then we cut open a cat.”

In the 1980s, a wave of Salvadorans fleeing the country's civil war — including some who had fought in the conflict — bolstered the gang but also began to change it. MS morphed into a more traditional street gang that offered Salvadorans protection from black and Latino gangs. Over time, MS outstripped its local rivals in sheer brutality. Its members became hardened by prison, where they adopted what Ward calls the "cholo" style of dress common in other Latino gangs.

(It was also inside California's penitentiaries that MS earned the "13" now in its name by aligning with the Mexican Mafia, a powerful prison gang known as la eMe, or "The M" — the 13th letter of the alphabet.)

One thing that didn't change, however, was the gang's association with satanism.

"When MSS became MS, it kept its reputation for Satan worship," Ward writes, "which gave it an aura of demonic mystery."

**'Scattering the organs on the ground in a pentagonal shape'**

By the mid 1990s — when L.A.'s soaring gang violence pushed it past D.C. for the title of America's murder capital — officials had come to recognize MS-13 as a public safety threat. Starting in President Bill Clinton's second term, the administration sought to tamp down gang violence in the U.S. by deporting thousands of MS-13 members to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

But the strategy backfired. In the weakly governed, war-ravaged countries of the Northern Triangle, the gang was able to reconstitute itself and then rapidly grow in strength, according to a two-part history of the gang published in the online Spanish-language newspaper El Faro.

Over the past 20 years, MS-13 and its rival, 18th Street, have carved up territory in Central America, said a federal law enforcement official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

"If you grow up in one of these havens, that's it. You are MS because your father was MS and your grandfather was MS," he said. "And for you to be able to walk down the street and get a Coca-Cola or what have you, you have to make sure you are part of something so you're not preyed upon. That's their safety net."

In these gang-controlled neighborhoods, satanism persisted.

"What the two gangs do have in common is the belief that life and death are somehow intermingled," Pablo Trincia wrote in the Independent. "This belief partly explains the bones and devils tattooed on their bodies, as well as their satanic rituals, such as hacking a victim to death and scattering the organs on the ground in a pentagonal shape."

As MS-13 violence returned to the United States with a vengeance in the mid 2000s — including a spate of high profile murders in the Washington region — so did reports of the gang's satanism.

“The brutality of the gangs’ crimes is increasingly horrific,” the Los Angeles Times reported in 2004. “Homicide victims, including many women and teenage girls, often are found so mutilated that Spanish priest Jose Maria Morataya, who runs a San Salvador rehabilitation and job training center for former gang members … suspects that some gang members practice satanic rituals.”

A year later, the Virginia Gang Investigators Association hosted a seminar for law enforcement officials on MS-13 and satanism.

“What [we are] doing is making sure [local police] are prepared when they show up,” Randy Crank, the association’s president, told the Associated Press.

**‘Sometimes the devil asked you to do things for him’**

No seminar could prepare American officials for someone like Jose Del Cid.

By the time he came to the United States illegally from El Salvador in 2012, the then-16-year-old was already a seasoned killer, he testified in federal court last year.

His first victim was nearly his own mother. She kicked him out of the house when he was 9. Members of an MS-13 clique, the Park View Locos Salvatrucha, or PVLS, found him sleeping by a river and took him in. One of the gang members gave Del Cid a shotgun and sent him home to kill his mom. Barely old enough to hold the weapon, he raised it to his mother’s face and pulled the trigger but it didn’t go off, he testified.

For two years, Del Cid served as a paro, or errand boy, delivering weapons and drugs between gang members. At 11, he was promoted after assisting in the deadly ambush of a Coca-Cola delivery truck driver who belonged to 18th Street. Two years later, Del Cid was given the chance to become a full-fledged member, or “homeboy,” when his clique captured another 18th Street member.

“The homeboys had the dude tied up by a river,” Del Cid testified in U.S. District Court in Alexandria last year as part of a sweeping federal case against the gang in Northern Virginia. “They gave me a machete and all I had to do was slash at him.”

The gang “cut him up and threw him into a bag and into the river,” Del Cid said. Afterward, Del Cid was officially “jumped in” as a homeboy with a beating that lasted 13 seconds.

After involvement in a third killing in El Salvador, Del Cid decided he “wanted to get away from all that” by coming to the United States. It’s unclear how he entered the country. Del Cid did not respond to questions sent to him through an attorney.

What is clear is that once in Alexandria, he quickly joined the local PVLS clique. Within months of arriving, Del Cid was involved in a string of brutal attacks. He admitted to stabbing a 12-year-old boy in the chest "just to scare him" — "if I had wanted to kill him, I would have gone [for] his neck," he said — pulling a gun on another teen, robbing a drug dealer, attacking a one-armed man with a hammer and making plans to kill two people, including another MS-13 member.

In October 2013, when Del Cid was 17, he helped murder a fellow gang member suspected of snitching, he said. But the body proved too big for the shallow grave in Holmes Run Park in Fairfax County.

"So we grabbed the machete and began to go at the legs," Del Cid testified. "And then we doubled them over and stuck them in the hole as well."

Del Cid and other gang members later dug up the body and moved it deeper into the woods, covering it in acid "to dissolve the body more quickly," he said. A couple of months later, when he was 18, Del Cid helped kill another gang member suspected of stealing from the gang and sleeping with another gang member's girlfriend. The victim's head was cut off and buried with his body in a shallow grave, again in Holmes Run Park.

In June 2014, Del Cid and two fellow MS-13 members were "on patrol" in Alexandria when they attacked someone they mistakenly thought belonged to the 18th Street gang. After an MS-13 member nicknamed "Taliban" shot the man, Del Cid and the gunman fled into the woods.

"I told you, homeboy, that what I wanted was to feed the beast," Taliban told him as they fled, Del Cid testified.

"Let's pray, homeboy," said Taliban, whose real name is Jesus Alejandro Chavez. "I have already fed the beast. Now we have to pray to the beast that we will not be caught."

"The beast basically is the devil," Del Cid explained in court. "When you [are involved in MS-13], you feel that the devil is helping you, and sometimes the devil asked you to do things for him."

Del Cid and Taliban made devil horns with their hands and joined them together to pray for deliverance from police.

But the devil wasn't listening.

Del Cid was arrested two weeks later. He eventually cooperated with authorities, pleading guilty to the pair of murders he committed as an 18-year-old and testifying at trial against 12 other MS-13 members in exchange for placement in the witness protection program while in prison and a possible early release.

Testifying earned him a "green light," or death sentence, from his old gang, he said in court. Yet it also offered him something immigrating to the U.S. had not: escape from MS-13.